FINDING OUR LOST UNITY

John 17:20-26

Last evening, at the service of preparation, we took a long look at the prayer of Jesus which he prayed at the conclusion of the Last Supper. In that prayer he prayed for the unity of the disciples; for a right relationship with the world; for an effective witness in the world. But the final section of the prayer broadens in scope, leaving the twelve behind and extending down through the centuries to include all believers of all ages. ("But it is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me; as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that thou dids't send me.")

It is very significant that as Jesus concluded his earthly ministry and prepared himself to bear the anxiety and physical suffering of the arrest, trial and crucifixion, that which was uppermost in his mind was the unity of his disciples and of all those who would believe in the future. The reason for this recurrent concern was two-fold; first that men might experience and enjoy a new unity with other men, and secondly--that the world might see the truth of the Gospel. In other words unity is one of the fruits of Christianity--but also one of its ~~leases~~ bases of existence. A unified Christendom would be the faith's best advertisement in the world. Our Lord was confident that men would believe when they saw the rare unity being experienced and displayed by the Christian Community.

As we, this evening, gather within the same context as that which prompted our Lord's prayer, I think it well that we consider again this matter of unity; what has happened to it, and how we can again find it.

Is there any better illustration of this tragedy than a burnt cross on a ministers' lawn--a cross that once bore God's own Son. Or a letter I received this week from a very devout religious man accusing me of treachery for speaking my mind in the matter of race relations?

Jesus Christ prayed for unity--"that they all may be one, even as we are one." The Church has always claimed that the true and only unity of man is found in Jesus Christ and only in him. At times, even this seems to contribute to disunity. The exclusiveness of Christianity, the claim that God has revealed himself in one way--and that all men must travel that one way to know God, appears at first to aggravate the disunity between different nations, races, cultures and religions that already exists.

I want to suggest this evening, however, that the very exclusiveness of Christianity is the only basis for unity among men. Had God revealed himself to each individual--or separately and in a different way to each nation or culture or race; or if God reveals himself through the different religions--men could find God without finding each other. Unity would be unnecessary and impossible--and our Lord's prayer, just a speculative thesis. Let me read to you a papagraph from John Baillie, a distinguished Scotch Presbyterians, which spoke to me at this point: "God has so ordained things that men can find salvation only by betaking themselves to one place; by listening to the same old, old story; by being received into the one fellowship; by reading in the same book; by praying the same prayers in the same name; by being baptized with the same baptism and partaking of the same meal; and by drwing their whole spiritual sustenance from the same unbroken tradition handed down from age to age across from one nation to another. In so ordaining things God has done all he could do, short of abrogating the freedom of human choice, to bring us together again in the restored unity of the human family."

one to the altar every morning)

The lost unity of mankind--is there any hope of restoring it in another way than this?"